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By Andy Piper

Dubuque's \$9.8 million parking ramp under construction at 10th Street and Central Avenue officially received a \$1.5 million funding boost Friday from the U.S. Commerce Department.

The seven-level, 477-space ramp is scheduled for completion in March 2011. Utility work around the site has blocked eastbound traffic on Ninth Street and a southbound lane on Central for several weeks.

The City Council approved construction of two downtown ramps last year. The other site is at Fifth and Bluff streets across from the Historic Federal Building. In December, the council voted to focus on the 10th and Central site after learning federal funding would not be as extensive as first thought. The city first anticipated getting a grant between \$5 million and \$7 million.

The ramp is being built to encourage economic development downtown. A lack of available parking is believed to be an impediment in attracting new businesses. The site also can support development in the Millwork District.

"This grant will fund a critical economic development project with sustainability components including charging stations for hybrid vehicles, indoor bicycle storage areas and public rest rooms," Mayor Roy Buol said.

The ramp's facade will be a combination of thin brick-faced architectural precast concrete and solid color precast panels to emulate a buff limestone façade. Vehicle entrances and exits will be on Iowa Street on the southwest corner and onto Central Avenue on the east side.

U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, said the facility is needed to accommodate workers at IBM, which could spur additional development. "The opening of IBM's new facility holds tremendous possibility for the city of Dubuque's economic development," Braley said. "This parking facility will allow the city of Dubuque to function effectively while also being a leader in clean energy development."